DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 272 006 FL 015 868

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TITLE Essential Cultural Information and Suggestions for Teaching It in German Business Courses.
PUB DATE May 85
NOTE 25p.; In: Proceedings of the Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages for Business and the Professions (4th, Dearborn, MI, May 2-4, 1985); see FL 015 835.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business Administration Education; Business Communication; *Cross Cultural Training; *Cultural Education; *German; Higher Education; Intercultural Communication; Languages for Special Purposes; Newsletters; Second Language Instruction; Slides; *Stereotypes; Tape Recordings; *Teacher Developed Materials

ABSTRACT

A course in German for business on the college level must engage in cross-cultural training as well as teach specialized vocabulary and conversational German for international business dealings. Materials and methods for such a course are described. Some generally untapped sources for material on corporate culture that are suited for use in the classroom include: (1) the newsletters of the "Industrie-und-Handelskammer," which often include articles on do's and don'ts for Germans coming to the United States and insights into German perceptions of American business attitudes; (2) conversations with Americans who have worked or done business in Germany or with Germans working in the United States; and (3) slides of everyday occurrences or sights in Germany, which are used to help sharpen observation and perceptions of cultural subjects. Business sections of German newspapers and in-house publications of German firms also contain cultural information embedded in business vocabulary. Examples are given of class activities for each of the three types of material. A description is provided of each slide and the kind of class discussion it can evoke. (MSE)

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ESSENTIAL CULTURAL INFORMATION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING IT IN GERMAN BUSINESS COURSES

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The audience at a convention like this is far from homogeneous. Some of you have been teaching business German for quite some time, some of you are newcomers to the field. This heterogeneity is a problem for the presenter since what is self-evident to one group is a revelation to the other. I have tried to strike a balance and hope that my paper, since it is primarily based on non-published sources, will have something to say to both groups.

> ". . . viewed from the outside, each culture is a 'hidden code' which makes it impossible to adequately comprehend one culture from the viewpoint of another without some instrument which functions as a 'code breaker' to facilitate translation. The most significant features of a culture are found in its non-verbal messages, which are usually taken for granted and transmitted unconsciously. These messages are highly situational in character, and they are seldom verbalized. Charged with emotion when norms are ignored, the meanings of messages are unique for each culture."[1]

Whether or not one agrees with the Halls' view that 90% of all communication is non-verbal,[2] it is certain that we need to teach our students in business German more than a specialized vocabulary. There seems to be general agreement on this point as the spate of books, articles and even bibliographies published in the last few years attests. In fact, the Halls' Hidden Differences. How to Communicate with the Germans makes

a good supplementary text for an upper level course in business German. It lends itself to straightforward assignments and their testing as well as role plays or simulated situations. But these need to be introduced early in the semester because they take a great deal of practice until students feel comfortable modifying their behavior patterns to suit an unfamiliar situation and interact with a person from a different culture.

Since many elementary and intermediate German language textbooks now consciously treat culture as an item separate from and no longer implicit only in language[3], we are, in a way, fortunate in business language courses. Students are more aware and informed regarding the culture of the target language so that one does not need to begin with such elementary tasks as introductions or the "Danke, Bitte, Danke" confusion. Nevertheless it is a good review as well as a chastening experience for the students to start with contrastive cultural stereotypes, as are found, for example, in Kohls' Survival Kit for Overseas Living,[4] or with questions concerning the United States that Americans are likely to encounter overseas and which are available in the Infogram series published by Brigham Young University. One could even use the famous picture of the young/old woman[5] in order to

sharpen the awareness of perceptual differences. Because our students no longer think Germans are really Americans who speak German, we can concentrate, in business German courses, on those aspects of German culture that are particularly germane and applicable to a business environment. Most of these aspects, as they pertain to corporate culture, are pretty well covered in the professional literature.

However, there are other, largely unpublished and untapped, sources that are particularly well suited for use in the classroom, and it is to these sources that I wish to address myself here. The ones I have chosen for this purpose are: 1) newsletters of the Industrie- und Handelskammer; 2) conversations with Americans who have worked or done business in Germany and Germans working temporarily in the US; and 3) slides to illustrate and sharpen the perception of cultural subjects.

In regard to the conversations on which I'll report, a disclaimer is in order. Take what is said as educated opinions, but opinions nevertheless.

Some of the regularly published I.H.K. newsletters contain articles on cultural matters, often in the form of dos and don'ts, for Germans planning to do business in the US. These articles are especially interesting

because they point out what is seen as different about Americans. Simply by inverting the information, one can gain insights about German business practices and behavior.

It is from these newsletters which I was shown during an interview with the director of the export department[6] of one branch (I found that one can walk into any local branch of the I.H.K. in any German city and talk to the person in charge of the foreign trade department.) that I picked up some tidbits of which I'll mention a representative sample. American business people are reputed to have more substantive, open and uncomplicated relationships than their German counterparts and not to be so secretive. They show more tact, are more easy-going and open towards innovations. Thus their questions tend to be open, direct, targeted. Americans will always demand to see statistics and strike their German counterparts as particularly knowledgeable about a product and its prices. Of particular interest to Germans is the American desire to split the difference between offer and price except for consumer goods prices, in regard to which Americans supposedly are not knowledgeable at all and will accept immediately any figure mentioned.

What seems particularly puzzling to Germans is the

value Americans put on discounts and contributions to advertising campaigns. Germans are cautioned over and over again not to assume that Americans will know anything about Germany or German industry and therefore need to be informed with tact. Furthermore, German business people are told that the American will have personal effects in her/his office, like pictures or mementos, and should be asked about them to simulate the small talk with which Americans begin and end business meetings. On the other hand, what tends to impress and/or overwhelm Americans when in Germany is that cultural interests cut across class lines and, what is even more surprising to Americans, across educational lines. What is not present in Germany is the all-consuming interest in sports which, in the US, cuts across class and educational lines. As would be expected, Germans are advised to inform themselves about American sports if they wish to establish a favorable atmosphere while doing business in here.

On the whole, the German perception seems to be that the US has a better business climate than Germany, the reason being the belief that Congress sees itself more as a partner of business than the Bundestag. The large number of civil servants in that body is supposedly the cause.

My final example from I.H.K. newsletter sources is the information that the two most important status symbols in the US are one's possessions, such as house and automobile, and the university one attended.

Thus it is evident that a wealth of cultural information about Germany is available in German cultural information about the US. I have found that students, when given these tidbits enjoy greatly making inferences about German business culture--once they get over wanting to dispute the German perceptions about the US.

From I.H.K. newsletters, in-house publications of major firms, as well as from the business sections of leading German newspapers, one can also glean cultural information imbedded in corporate vocabulary vital for our students. I'll give only four examples: the trend towards democratization in the German corporate world, an attempt to gloss over social and rank distinctions, is discernible in terms like Mitarbeiter to refer to anyone from the Putzfrau, officially upgraded to Raumpflegerin, to the Executive Officer. Even more pregnant is the term im Hause, meaning the company one works for, because it implies a family, mutual interest, and strong identification. Or think of the concept Geschäftsfreund, a word rich in cultural

connotations and unknown in the US where one has friends with whom one does business. And lastly, "Man arbeitet bei, nicht für eine Firma." My four examples are meant to be representative of the potential inherent in non-technical vocabulary used in the German business world, a potential that lends itself very well to teaching.

The second source for corporate cultural information and one not found in publications is in our communities right here. The Detroit area might have an advantage over some others in the US in that it is highly industrial and has a large number of international companies. There are people in our communities who have worked and/or done business in Germany as well as Germans working here. These business people are most helpful once they understand what it is you are after. I taped two dinner conversations, one with American business people and one with Germans temporarily working here. They constitute a largely untapped source rich in information. There was a great deal of unanimity in opinions about cultural essentials that our students should know, with the Germans going into greater detail and being more specific. Not surprisingly, the perceptions of both Germans and Americans we talked to

not only converge, they dovetail with the theoretical underpinnings by Hall, Troyanovich[8] and others. Thus observation based on personal experience and cross-cultural theory support each other, a reassuring state of affairs. What follows are the salient points of these conversations.

A joke about American career paths making the rounds in German companies goes: "ein Vierteljahr Kredituren, ein Vierteljahr Debituren, so wird man Finanzchef." This joke encapsulates striking differences in careers in the two corporate cultures, differences our students must understand. There is, for one, the difference in attitude both of the employe towards the employer, and vice-versa. There is a strong sense of loyalty towards the German company and its tradition, a loyalty that leads the company, for its part, to feel an obligation to its staff. While in the US changing the company one works for is a means of career advancement, such changes, by and large, are not seen favorably in Germany. Instead, career-minded employes consolidate their positions within a firm. The reputation of the firm one works for is in itself a status symbol.

Since the courtesy code in Germany in general is determined by seniority in both senses of the word, we

need to practice certain behavior patterns with our students. They need to understand that Germans feel uncomfortable when rushed into friendships; they need to keep their distance and wait for the German to make the first move. This behavior is difficult to learn, particularly for those who spent any time at a German university or as tourists in Germany because they have experienced the informality in form of address, clothing and manners among young Germans. In this regard, the position of secretaries in Germany, in particular, needs stressing. They are less friendly and more condescending than their US counterparts, in part because they work more independently than American secretaries. For instance they are used to taking care of business correspondence on their own and signing it. Our students must learn not to see the use of first names as a sign of friendliness but as a lack of respect.

The American also has to learn that punctuality and planning occupy a special place in the work world as well as the private one. Spontaneity is not highly prized in either. Punctuality and planning in advance give evidence of courtesy and orderliness, both highly valued.

It has been my experience in teaching business

German that students are vocally anti-union. It seems to be their ambition to "rise" above what they perceive of as clearly blue collar status. Since this is, in part, an emotional issue, it is extremely difficult to confront them with a differing German attitude. There are several aspects to German unions an American interested in German business must know about in order to avoid blunders. For one, parts of the German labor union movement spring from a Christian tradition; i.e., not all can be associated with the Social Democrats. Labor unions are, therefore, perceived less as adversaries and don't arouse the kind of antipathy in the business community they do here. For another, every employe up to the level of department head (Abteilungsleiter) belongs to a union, whatever its name, including engineers and management people. This explains why German business people have to leave the office at a certain time or be paid overtime after prior application to the Betriebsrat. As if this were not a confusing and emotionally charged enough situation for our students, one needs to explain the differing definitions of unionism in the two cultures. From the American point of view, German unions are company unions since they define their raison d'être not in opposition to, but rather in cooperation with,

the companies. From the German point of view, on the other hand, US unions don't even deserve that name because they do not, by and large, concern themselves with environmental or societal matters. Of course, anyone who knows anything about the US labor movement knows that this perception is only partly correct. Nevertheless, the American in a German business setting is well advised to refrain from railing against unions--unless the German starts it.

The concept most difficult to impart by far concerns the difference in level of decision making between the two cultures, and yet this is the issue that presents the greatest pitfalls. In the US, that level is relatively low, while in Germany, in most firms, no real decisions are made below that of an Abteilungsleiter. I.e., most engineers and management people do what can be called staff work (Zuarbeit) which involves little or no risk equivalent to that of their US counterparts. As a consequence, there is an absence of initiative and flexibility so highly valued here. In amazing unanimity my German contacts attributed this absence of initiative and flexibility to lack of opportunity to exercise these talents and to the motto "No need to hustle." High fringe benefits and great job security are seen as perpetuating this

behavior on the job; in fact, the aggressiveness with which Americans pursue their job and career goals evokes dislike, lack of understanding and disdain. The same holds in regard to displays of self-confidence. In part these differing behavior patterns were attributed to what was perceived to be the on-the-job-training and learning by Americans and the training and learning done in advance by Germans.

By way of example, my German guests commented on the high drop-out rate among the Americans in their respective firms who had signed up for language classes. They attributed this phenomenon to the unreasonably high level of expectation, the inability to settle for slow progress, and the absence of perseverance (Sitzfleisch) among the Americans. Short-term thinking and short-term goals dominate the American business scene and thus produce behaviors that are, at best, irritating to Germans. A further, obvious example are the quarterly dividends in this country vs. the annual dividends in Germany. Obviously, one cannot and should not attempt to turn our students into Germans; however, they need to be cautioned and their perceptions sharpened so that they can function with a minimum of friction.

One way to sharpen perceptions and my third source

for imparting cultural information is through the use of slides. It has been my experience that simply showing slides and letting students tell me what they see, i.e., freely associate, does not sensitize them to observing well. It seems to me that, ultimately, our students' ability to function and succeed when they work with or for Germans depends on their powers of observation and the resultant adaptability. It is like eating unknown food for the first time and watching the experienced eater for clues. Therefore, I choose my slides to illustrate a point, i.e., I state what the slide demonstrates or reveals. I then incorporate previously unseen slides in the testing process, though at the beginning only those that cover the same ground, but slowly introducing slides that require the students to find cultural clues not previously mentioned by me.

I have chosen some examples of slides to show you how they can be used. Some I made myself and some are copies from the collection of Professor James Lamse of Calvin College, Michigan.

To quote from the Halls once more:

> Many people dismiss culture as merely manners or unimportant, superficial differences. To hold this view can be a vital mistake because culture is far from superficial . . . [culture] programs the actions and responses of people and it must be learned before you can make the system work."[9]

A. On the subject of privacy:

#1 Afternoon coffee in the back yard, which is totally shielded from view by neighbors or passersby.

#2 A woman ironing on her terrace.

There are three pieces of information in this picture that I use: the cut of the curtains to accommodate the plants on the windowsill; the use of the terrace as an extension of the house, i.e., ironing done outside, which permits an excursion into the subject of the climate and/or the German love of fresh air.

B. On the subject of the close proximity of the old and the new:

#1 A regulation trashcan with the required label "Keine heisse Asche einfüllen."

I have fun with that slide because the identical trashcans are required in all of Germany. This slide also lends itself to a review of the various imperatives and the caution never to use this particular one in ordinary discourse.

#2 Here is the regulation trashcan in its regulation casing.

#3 Milk cans on a farm.

A scene like this has become rare in Germany.

#4 A street scene typical of small or medium sized towns. Half-timbered house, the flower boxes, the cars, the wrought-iron sign on the right identifying the restaurant. But most important is the fact that the ground floors are shops with living quarters above. I explain the importance of this arrangement for keeping towns alive and relatively crime free.

#5 The famous Steigstraße in Meersburg. I use this slide for testing.

C. On the subject of the Post Office:

#1 A directory to the windows at the post office. This slide shows the three functions of the Bundespost, the mail system, the telephone system, the post office as bank, the latter two differing from the function of the US postal service.

#2 The stamp machines--yellow is the German postal system's color.

#3 A row of parked post office automobiles. I use this slide for testing purposes. Students should know that it can't be

coincidence that six yellow cars are parked next to each other.

D. The following slides are ads. They are a marvellous source of cultural information, specifically because, in contrast to the US where most advertising is done on TV, in Germany most ads appear in the print media which include posters.

#1 The ad for Camel cigarettes is obviously an American import while

#2 the ad for Peer cigarettes, with its snob appeal, is obviously German in origin.

#3 Schöfferhofer Weizen.
Erfrischend herzhaft. This beer ad, in contrast, with its picturesque, touristy setting appeals to a different set of emotions. One can do wonderful things with the word "herzhaft," the size of the beer steins and the checkered tablecloths.

#4 An ice cream sundae.
McDonald's, which is beginning to rival Coca Cola as the world-wide symbol of the US, not only introduced an heretofore unknown way of embellishing ice cream in Germany, the ad is based on a pun. I let the students guess what

the pun "eisgeliebt" is.

#5 This Hirschquelle ad, a still life, caters to the ever growing demand for natural products. Please note that in this ad "Tutgut" precedes "Schmeckt gut." Also, showing this slide offers the opportunity of talking about the role of mineral water in the German diet and its place on menues in German restaurants.

#6 A chalk board menu in a small restaurant. This slide is particularly rich in information. For one, of the six items listed, only three are German. Of greater interest, however, is the regulation that chemical preservatives added to foods must be listed on restaurant menues though not on foods sold in stores.

#7 A window display of an Apotheke. Here we can talk about the difference between Apotheke and Drogerie and have again the emphasis on a natural product--though the brand name is obviously designed to appeal to the younger set.

#8 A humorous book store window display of classical works with the slogan "Unsere Klassiker sind keine Gipsköpfe."

It is a campaign, a marvellous pun. Students tend to derive comfort from the idea that not all Germans are brainy types who run around reading Faust in their spare time. The older among you will recognize the pun associated with jokes about Klein-Erna, Tünnes und Scheel, and Hitler.

#9 The storefront window of a bank, discreetly curtained.

A sign shows a park bench and carries the text: WIR KENNEN "DIE BANK" DIE AUCH IHREN KREDIT-WUNSCH ERFÜLLT. An ad with a pun. The real reason for showing this slide, however, is the opportunity it affords to talk about the subject of benches in the cities, most often paid for by local banks.

#10 A moving streetcar.

A picture of a Strassenbahn is nothing unfamiliar to our students. Neither is the concept of public conveyances carrying advertising.

#11 The inside of a streetcar.

Prominently displayed is a billboard with the following art: Die Bibel, Gottes Wort, sagt: Wenn ein Ausländer bei euch wohnt, in eurem

Land: den sollst du lieben wie dich selbst. (3. Mose 19. 33 u. 34) This ad, paid for by the Christliche Alliance, is not an ordinary one. The exhortation to love, not your neighbor, but a foreigner, as yourself, is of particular interest because it points to the problem of Gasterbeiter. This is one of my test slides; I want the students to tell me what cultural deductions they can make from such an ad displayed in such a setting.

E. The next two slides show the interior of a bank.

#1 A teller at a window.

Note the marble top signaling the soundness of the bank, and the fact that the teller is a middle-aged male. The concept of Bankbeamter needs to be introduced. It is an appellation used regardless of whether the employe is, in fact, a Beamter or an Angestellter.

#2 The daily list of foreign currency exchange rates is displayed in most banks, even in small town banks.

Therefore, it must be of interest to the average German and thus bespeaks the German enthusiasm for foreign travel. Many Germans

follow the exchange rate of the Mark with something akin to national pride and patriotism.

F. The next two slides speak to the seriousness with which Germans approach their vacation. This is the place to speak about mandated vacation time and the concept of Betriebsferien.

#1 A Preistafel at the door of a restaurant. It carries the message: "Betriebsferien: Vom 19.7-19.8." This restaurant, one of the best and most expensive in Regensburg, is closed for a whole month. Note the dates, the height of the tourist season. In 1982, when this slide was made, it was the time of summer vacation for the Bavarian schools. This notice lends itself to an excursion into German social legislation and mandated and regulated store hours. One could even mention the cabinet post of Familienminister.

#2 A book store window display. Written diagonally across the window is "Urlaub 82. Man sieht nur, was man weiß." Again, a sight unfamiliar in the US, where we find vacation-type reading listed in

publications like Newsweek or the Sunday supplement of our local papers, perhaps. The collection here displayed in a bookstore, however, includes maps, picture books and guides to tourist attractions; it does not include so-called light reading, the kind you curl up with. This slide, thus, illuminates, in particular, two points: the serious attitude Germans have towards their vacation and the rather dubious and intimidating slogan which, if it were completely true, would render one's powers of observation and perception ineffective and irrelevant. However, since it does contain a kernel of truth, it, of course, underlines our efforts to impart cultural information. Incidentally, comparing vacation book store displays in Germany from season to vacation seasons reveals a marvellous road map (pun intended) of the ever changing "in" places. What is largely reserved for and specific of the jet set in this country is characteristic of a sizeable segment of the German population.

The last three slides show traffic signs. I

include them here because their use may serve the purpose of pointing out similarities rather than differences. One could choose to base the use of slides on that principle just as well as on that of differences. The first two are self-evident (KinderÜbergang" and "Nur für FussgÄnger), but the last is of greater interest because it tells you that you are leaving a village, town or city which means that the speed limit changes. It also tells you the distance to the next place, very helpful information.

As you can see from the kind of slides I chose, and one could, of course, choose a totally different set or even limit oneself to more business oriented slides, I have tried to combine two functions: on the one hand, I use them to impart information or to illustrate cultural information covered elsewhere in the course and by different means. On the other hand, I make the viewing of slides an active rather than only a passive activity for the students. It becomes active because students will take seriously anything included in the testing process. The hope is, of course, that this will alter their perceptions and sharpen their powers of observation and deduction, both of which are essential skills for them if they want to operate successfully in a German company here or abroad or in situations where they have to deal with Germans.

Notes

[1]Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall, Hidden Differences. Studies in International Communication. How to Communicate with the Germans (Hamburg: Stern Magazine, 1983), p.9.

[2]Ibid., p.15.

[3]For a review and summary of this trend, see Mary Beechy Pfeiffer, "Annäherungen an das Alltagsleben: Sachbezogene Dias als Mittel landeskundlichen Lernens," Unterrichtspraxis, 17, No.1 (1984), pp.10-27.

[4]Robert L. Kohls, Survival Kit for Overseas Living (Chicago: Intercultural Press, 1979). See also Hall and Hall, pp.92-93.

[5]Ibid., p.57.

[6]Herr Emde, Industrie- und Handelskammer, Ständeplatz 17, 3500 Kassel.

[7]Edward T. Hall, The Silent Language (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959). See also his Hidden Dimensions (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966).

[8]John Troyanovich, "Methodische Rundschau. American Meets German. - Culture Shock in the Classroom," Unterrichtspraxis, V., No.2 (1972), pp.67-79.

[9]Hall and Hall, Hidden Differences, p.14.